

ELECTIONS

As in modern democracies, so in both Rome and the provincial towns elections were of key importance. At Rome there were annual elections at which the citizen body elected the magistrates, who were the executives of the whole system of government. There were four 'colleges' of magistrates, and those aspiring to high office had to hold each post in succession. The junior post was that of quaestor (treasury official); next were the aediles, who had general administrative duties; then came the praetors, who were in charge of judicial administration; and finally the two consuls, the chief executives of the state.

The magistrates held office for one year only and there was a minimum age at which candidates were allowed to stand. On becoming a quaestor, you automatically joined the senate for life, and so at the elections the people not only chose those who were to hold office for a year but also the members of the senate, who advised and in fact controlled the magistrates.

However, the system was not as democratic as it sounds since in the elective assemblies there were elaborate arrangements by which the votes of the richer citizens counted for more than those of the poor. Elections were rigged, bribery was normal, and the common people were only allowed to vote for members of the upper classes. The many conquests which were expanding the empire brought more and more slaves to Rome and they did more and more of the work. There was, therefore, an increasing number of unemployed citizens who had to be supported by subsidized or free grain. There was no good reason for voting for one candidate rather than another except for their short-term promises, and so the common people's vote tended to go to those who gave them the most grain or put on the best shows in the theatre. A Roman poet called Juvenal was to remark, with considerable truth, that the only things that interested them were 'bread and circuses' (*pānem et circēnsēs*).

In provincial towns the local government was modelled on that of Rome. The citizens of a *colōnia* met annually in assembly to elect the two magistrates (*duoviri*) who were to run their town for a year. Corresponding to the senate there was an assembly of 80–100 councillors (*decuriōnēs*) who were recruited from ex-magistrates and held office for life. Like the senate, their function was to advise the *duoviri* and in practice they ran public affairs.



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